

Culture and Art Criticism

الثقافة والنقد الفني

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May 2013

Abstract

This brief essay sheds new light on the practice of art criticism. Commencing by the definition of a work of art as contingent upon intuition, the essay highlights the importance of contextualizing any work of art as opposed to a mere appreciation of its intrinsic value. It is argued that individual culture is part and parcel of the triad: art-aesthetics-art criticism. Artistic taste directs the choices made by an artist but it is artistic personality that creates true art. The art critic is able to evaluate the authenticity of an artistic personality by an understanding of art as intuition and an understanding of art in relation to history.

Keywords: individual culture, intuitive knowledge, artistic taste, historical complex

Art as Intuition

A work of art is not a spontaneous occurrence but an object intentionally produced by a process of thinking, feeling, and responding undertaken by individuals who are part of a larger social environment. The production of meaning inherent in the art object does not derive solely from intrinsic formal qualities but also from the extrinsic socio-cultural situation. This is so much so that the method, style, or form of any given work of art reflects the current ideology, time and place in which it was made. Without considering the original environment of the work, the observer cannot fully experience its meaning and purpose; if not missing entirely on either.

To give a simple example from the domain of architecture, the work of Frank Lloyd Wright should not be seen or criticized through the eyes of Mies van der Rohe and, vice versa, the work of Mies should not be seen through the eyes of Wright; otherwise, one fails to appreciate Mies' personal way of feeling. What should be admired in the work of each architect is his distinct way or language of creation rather than trying to fit one work into the frame of the other.

The reason behind the incompatibility of using the vantage point of one work of art for seeing another work of art is that the total effect of each work, i.e. its intuition, is different. Intuition is to a work of art what a central concept is to a philosophical dissertation. The difference between a scientific work and a work of art, that is, between an intellectual fact and an intuitive fact, lies in the difference of the total effect aimed for by their respective authors. It is the total effect that determines and rules the coherence of the parts in the whole; otherwise, parts would remain separate and unrelated.

Because intuition, or intuitive knowledge, is free from any suggestion of intellectualism or any external additions of any kind, i.e. non-rational in character, there arises the inevitability of subjectivity and personal bias in judging a work of art. In other words, each work of art has its own aesthetic approach or taste.

The artist does not produce his work for the critics and historians alone but also for a wider audience that appreciates the work of art beyond mere pleasure of the eyes to express judgement that argues for the reason behind what is seen. The architect possessing a delicate artistic sense knows how to discover in the work of art the various aesthetic qualities it contains and mix reasoning with such appreciation. The difficulty to uncover the real and fundamental source of satisfaction with abstract painting, for instance, may be due to our

inability to see far enough beyond the art of our own day. This difficulty is akin to the not uncommon problems encountered when learning a new language.

Contextualizing a work of art

Art criticism, like art itself, is not necessarily worse for being ephemeral or for restating the problem that had preoccupied one age in the vocabulary of another. There is a criticism appropriate for each age in using the vocabulary of another. There is a criticism appropriate for each period. I believe that the problem of not understanding digital architecture, for instance, is that we are seeking an order, not necessarily absolute for all times, but one that might serve us as we go along. The role of the critic in this case is to find or discover such an order.

Works of art should be judged in conformity with the aesthetic feeling of the critic. Aesthetics and philosophy are needed in order to serve as a basis for a universal definition of art as well as a standard for evaluating ideas. In other words, aesthetic theory is needed in order to distinguish whether a picture or a statue is a work of art, an artistic creation, or a rational, economical, or moral, fact.

Art criticism that renounces theory and that relies solely on the aesthetic feeling of the critic may be of little value when compared to the aesthetic feeling of a layman. Such a type of art criticism would reduce aesthetic appreciation to an intellectual game rather than elevate it to a science or a philosophy. In order to grasp the absurdity of such a reduction, it may be useful to recall the principle of Immanuel Kant according to which every concept without intuition is empty and every intuition without concept is blind.

A work of art cannot be fully understood and judged except by taking it back to the elements from which it resulted. Otherwise, the work of art would become uprooted from its historical complex to which it belongs and would then lose its true significance. At the same time, however, a work of art cannot be understood and judged except in, and of, itself. Otherwise, the work of art would cease to become a work of art because the scattered elements that compose the work of art are, notionally, also present in the mind of non-artists. It is only the artist who finds the new form, that is to say, the new content, which then becomes the whole soul of the new work of art.

The solution to this dilemma is to recognize that a work of art certainly has value in itself, but to also recognize that this self is not something simple or abstract like an arithmetic unity. This self is rather something complex, concrete and living; an organism, a whole composed of parts. Put succinctly, in order to understand a work of art, it is necessary to understand the whole in the parts and, in turn, the parts in the whole. The truth of the first proposition is that the whole is not known except through the parts and the truth of the second proposition is that the parts are not really known except through the whole.

The historical complex within which the work of art is rooted is comprised of several categories. For example, the country in which the artist was born and raised; the geographic, climatic and demographic conditions; the political and social conditions of his historical moment; his private life; his physiological and pathological constitution; his religious and moral beliefs, etc. Which of these categories or facts should the art critic take into account? The answer is that all categories may be indispensable, and none of them is so of necessity. Contextual information that should be taken into account would only be those categories that are in relation to, and bear on, the particular work of art.

Preference or Artistic Taste

If we analyze the elements that present themselves to the mind of the artist, we find that the artist may draw inspiration from the universe. In nature, the artist may draw inspiration from a human figure or a tree. The artist then pays attention to this line or that colour, or more to this line and less to that colour, or the other way around. The artist will also choose the reproducing medium and material such as marble or bronze, oil or tempera colour, according to preference. The artist will then choose the quality of light: bright and diurnal, or

contracted and natural. Finally, the artist will put into relationship a complex of things: his vision with his way of feeling, his scientific knowledge with the social class to which he belongs, and perhaps ponder the aesthetic discussion which he will have had with friends or masters. All this creative work is not science, or religion, or aesthetics inserted in the work of art but is a way of feeling science, or religion, or aesthetics. It is an individual preference which is not justified by pure reasoning but certainly by the work of art itself.

A preference in art is always a principal in art criticism. It is a criticism without universal pretensions, i.e. a tendency towards criticism, a desire for criticism, a judgement of the senses. It is not art or criticism, it is a process not a result. It is individual and may belong to a group of individuals. It is not criticism, it is a taste.

Taste is an idea which follows the inclination of the artist/painter and is formed by education. Each school of art has its taste in design. Taste is that which produces and determines in the painter a principal aim and influences his choice of what to include or discard, of what suits or discords. Hence, whenever one sees a world in which everything is expressed without distinction or variety, one says that the author is in fact without taste since nothing in particular is to be observed in it and such work remains, so to speak, without significance.

The success of the work of any artist/painter is contingent upon his choices and what he understands of colours or any other thing related to the art of painting. There has not been a master who has had a taste equally good in all things related to the art of painting. Rather, masters are known by their ability to choose very well in some aspects of painting and not very well in other aspects and perhaps, in a few aspects, badly or not at all.

To understand an aesthetic principle means to verify its present expression, and in some way, to criticize it. On the other hand, it is necessary that the historical complex / experience should be illuminated by the assumed aesthetic principle and so, in a sense, becomes transformed. The only way to understand the theoretical value of an aesthetic principle is made possible in light of the history of aesthetics. Evidently, there is no other way of understanding art except through a compilation of a critical history of it.

Art criticism

The relation between aesthetics and art, between the idea of art and artistic intuition is art criticism. If the art historian must know the history of aesthetics, with even more reason must he know the way in which aesthetic principles have been applied to works of art; that is to say, he must know the history of art criticism.

However, strange it may appear, there does not yet exist a history of art criticism. There only exists monographs and what has been published seems to concede too much importance to the practical and social side of criticism with too little judgements on works of art. It is necessary then to make use of the monographic work of others in tracing a general outline of the development of art criticism and to extract the principal results. The catalogue of the works of art of an artist, and the philological criticism of a historic-artistic source are important and sometimes essential contributions to the critical history of art.

Neither a philological work nor an aesthetic theory nor an act of taste fully realizes art criticism. Judgement of the artist or of the work of art must be the centre of our treatment. It then becomes mandatory to identify the history of art with art criticism and with the intuition or individuality of the artist, i.e. his creativity. The principles of judgement are then perceived to be:

1. The pragmatic factor, which is given by purpose of the work of art on which judgement is brought to bear.
 2. The ideal factor, which is given by the aesthetic ideas of the critic and in general by his philosophical ideas and moral orientation. In short, by the civilization to which he addresses and which he helps to form.
 3. The psychological factor, which depends upon the personality of the critic.
- The psychological factor is more important for a monograph on a critic than for a general history of art criticism. In effect, criticism is a totality more than critics.

The ideal factor is essential to the historical importance of judgement. Without a theory of art as a spiritual activity, without a refusal of the idea of art as imitation of nature, we would never be able to understand that the work of an artist has its own perfection. Notably, it is a history of criticism and not a history of the genetic process of critical ideas. An essential condition for the perfection of critical ideas is the criticism of preceding ideas. Importantly, critics create their ideas not only by criticizing preceding ideas but above all by intuitive experience of works of art, that is, by its pragmatic factor. It is a continual return to the origin, to the intuitive impulse to contact with the work of art, of mind to mind, outside the limits imposed by the critical tradition without which the creation of a new criticism could not be otherwise possible.

It is necessary to avoid the dualism which would exist if the origin of artistic judgement was based, on one hand, in aesthetic ideas and, on the other hand, on works of art. Judgement of art obeys the same framework that art obeys and is structured by the elements of the critic's tastes, specifically illuminated in the synthesis of the judgement. The essential condition of the artistic judgement is to have a universal idea of art, and at the same time, to recognize in it the personality of the artist to be judged. In other words, artistic judgement must consider the personality of the artist as an expression of universal art. No concrete personality is to be sacrificed to any abstract idea of art. Of course, the desire for a universal principle of judgement is necessary and justified; otherwise, any personal preference whatsoever would be justified in the presence of history without discrimination between true and false judgement, or even between good and bad taste. In this latter case, the history of art itself would no longer be history but mere historicism, pure erudition.

Artistic Personality

One must bear in mind that the character of a work of art is intuitive and not logical, concrete and not abstract, individual and not universal. Every truly artistic personality comprehends in itself all the schemes and composes them in a special way which constitutes the specificity of that personality. In order to comprehend if that personality is truly artistic or not, there is only one way : to have intuition of art, to feel its spiritual value and reflect upon the character of art as distinct from that of other human activities, rational or religious, moral or utilitarian.

It has been necessary to let this explanation of the nature of artistic judgement precede the historical exposition of many judgements expounded through the centuries in order that the reader may understand why and when to agree or disagree with these judgements. History and criticism have each acquired greater depth. What now remains is the problem of bringing them close together.

Artistic sensibility is the necessary wellspring of critical perception. Critics with artistic sensibility created a new and more vital awareness of contemporary art and they apprehended art in the process of becoming, that is, by reconstructing the artistic personality. They could not have achieved so much without the idea of idealistic aesthetics. Had they not participated in the experience of the artist, had they not been so impassioned in their feelings, these artistic ideas could not have borne fruit.

The importance of this intersection is demonstrated by the aesthetic judgement of Hegel, the art historian of his time. Students of aesthetics and art history are never able to grasp art in the process of becoming. Rather, they are better acquainted with the works of the past than they are with contemporary art. Too often, they consider the activity that surrounds them as merely decadent or as a denial of art, and this prevents them from understanding eternal human creativity.

A sympathy for past cultures can be rational but it cannot identify with a passion for art. Moreover, such sympathy often leads the critic to judge the art of his own time by the standards of the past and, accordingly, misunderstand that which is original and authentic in contemporary art or to confuse the initiative of traditional schemes with creativity. Furthermore, such a sympathetic attitude may also mean that the art of the past, too, is not understood since it is not seen in terms of its cultural schemes. Schemes that belong to taste and not to art constitute the conditional and transient aspects that have no lasting worth.

Neither the present nor the past can be understood in this way. It is the experience of contemporary art that teaches us to see the art of the past and not the reverse, because this experience sums up and justifies in itself the experience of the art of the past. This truth is as valid for art as it is for philosophy. It is not possible to find one's way in contemporary taste. This is because all interpretation of art is based on ancient art and that resulted in misunderstanding both ancient art and contemporary art. The practised ability in evaluating the past is then revealed for what it is: empty virtuosity devoid of spiritual content.

The art critic as artist

The passion that only judges according to abstract principles and not out of spontaneous love of the creative art should be avoided. The art critic moves within the human world of man's passion and fantasies and, thus, detachment is not suitable to the art critic whereas it is natural for the scientist. This involvement, or partiality, of the critic does not hinder him from observing a work from many sides, and even, theoretically, from all sides. He is partial to the everlasting creativity that is reborn every day and at any instant with the work of art.

If the critic has acquired that seminal force that makes a work of art, he will be able to recognize it in any work irrespective of the taste in which it was executed. Using this same critical basis, others have been able to understand the work of Michelangelo and Bramante. The creativity of form and colour creates a unique harmony by which to judge art. Creativity, however, cannot be isolated from life. Unless the artist acquires an attitude toward his own creativity informed by moral seriousness and by aspirations towards the infinite and the universal, the moral and religious demands of art would be rhetoric and not art.

When it is said of a work of art that it transcends its own times, one means that its creativity belongs to all mankind, to whoever feels and imagines irrespective of time or place. Art has the ability to transcend history while participating in it. Consequently, it is impossible to see an artist's creativity without complete knowledge of his historical environment and culture. Sensibility and knowledge are essential conditions of all sound criticism. Criticism considers a work of art in light of the artist's intention and of the condition in which he created it. Its validity as truth is generally accepted.
